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## In Attack by Danish Tanks, 'the Mouse Ate the Cat'

By John Pomfret

Washington Post Service

TUZLA, Bosnia-Herzegovina — When Serbian fighters shelled an isolated United Nations observation post near Tuzla last week, it was an unremarkable event. In nearly two years of UN operations in Bosnia, this country's combatants have routinely shelled, sniped and humiliated UN soldiers — even, sometimes robbing them at gunpoint of their weapons and uniforms.

But last Friday night, the Serbian fusillade elicited a UN response more incendiary than the usual verbal protest. A Danish officer, Lieutenant Colonel Lars Moller, ordered his white-painted Leopard tanks to fire back at the Serbian artillery position.

By dawn, the Danish Army had fought its fiercest battle since the Nazi invasion of 1943 — and Colonel Moller had shown that the United Nations need not always retreat in the face of its frequent military challenges by the Serbs.

Colonel Moller said his tour in the Balkans had taught him that "if you are scared down here, you're going to get kicked — that's the way it works."

In Bosnia's civil war, he said: "All sides are full of a lot of macho bull. You have to adjust your behavior accordingly."

The Danes' destruction of a Serbian artillery position underscored the dilemma of UN peacekeeping. UN soldiers and foreign-aid workers here often express frustration with the UN forces' passivity in the face of provocations. But the Danes' momentary aggressiveness was similar to that adopted as policy — and abandoned in frustration — by the peacekeeping mission in Somalia last year.

Colonel Moller, for example, does not

view his troops' riposte as, in the end, a victory.

By finally shooting back, the colonel and his troops destroyed bridges of confidence and trust that they had painstakingly built to the Serbian side. The Danes had built a 6.5-kilometer (4-mile) road for Serbian children to use in walking to school from the nearby village of Pelemsi, so they would remain safe from Muslim shelling. They had arranged shipments of diesel fuel to Serbian road repair crews and seeds to Serbian farmers.

But, Colonel Moller said, given the bellicose psyche of this region, its deadly postur-

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ing and its adolescent tests of strength, he cannot regret having given the order to fire.

"The UN should not bow its head to any of these people," he said. "Once you do that, you lose your dignity and, even worse, the other guy will keep walking over you. In the Balkans, you've gotta stand tall."

Standing tall has been difficult for the Nordic Battalion — a UN unit comprising 1,753 Swedes, Danes, Norwegians and Dutch — that is based around the Muslim-held region of Tuzla. In the last two months, Serbian gunfire has destroyed four of the battalion's armored personnel carriers.

Although the Serbian attacks have grown intense, the UN political command in Za-

greb, Croatia — directed by a special envoy, Yasushi Akashi of Japan — has rejected at least four of the battalion's requests for North Atlantic Treaty Organization planes to fly close air support for UN troops.

But on Friday, the UN response came not from Zagreb or New York. It came from the Danish soldiers in their Leopard tanks, the most advanced weapons system of the meager UN arsenal in Bosnia.

Shortly after 11 P.M., Serbian gunners around Mount Vis, to Tuzla's south, opened up on a UN observation post called Tango 2. Since October, according to UN figures, the Serbs had shelled the post 28 times with 96 shells. As they always do, the Leopards responded.

Colonel Moller and his men sped east from Tuzla in seven tanks and two armored personnel carriers. At the village of Saraci, in view of the Serbian gunners, the Danes stopped and — in accord with UN rules of engagement — illuminated their white vehicles with searchlights to let the Serbs know they were there.

The lights drew shellfire. One shell landed 9 meters (30 feet) from Colonel Moller's vehicle, he said. Others blew shrapnel over the tanks.

"At that point we turned the lights off," Colonel Moller said. "Gooooo thinking, as the Brits say."

With that, Colonel Moller's operation began in earnest. The Danes had practiced the routine. Four of the Danish tanks and an armored personnel carrier sped to another village, Kalesija, which was closer to Tango 2.

The Danes moved two tanks up the hill toward the beleaguered observation post, and placed two others behind houses in the

village. Then, the Danes said, the Serbs stepped up the attack, firing 40mm anti-tank cannons.

By then the Serbs had been firing for 30 minutes, the Danes said. When the troops in Saraci reported that more anti-tank rockets were on their way, the three tanks in Saraci fired four warning shots. When the Serbs continued the attack, the Danes fired in earnest.

The first round silenced an anti-tank gun; the second destroyed the post of a forward artillery observer, and the third plowed through a Serbian bunker, the Danes said.

"Things were getting out of hand," Colonel Moller said. He and Major Carsten Rasmussen, the tank unit commander, agreed to hold their fire and ensure that Serbian shelling of Tango 2 had ceased. After 30 minutes of quiet, the forward tanks began moving back to Saraci, but the Serbs began attacking them again.

The officers ordered the tanks fire again, continuously, for 15 minutes.

One round plowed into a Serb ammunition dump, igniting a huge, concussive blast. The Bosnian Serbs said afterward that nine soldiers died in the exchange.

Colonel Moller said the Danes spared three Serbian T-55 tanks because, although the Leopards' infrared detectors found the Serbs' aiming systems turned on, they also determined that the enemy tanks' barrels were cold. Under the restrictive UN rules of engagement, only guns actually caught in act of firing may be hit.

Colonel Moller said the ordeal was meant to be a trap for the Danes.

"It was an ambush," he said. "Tango 2 was the cheese, and we were the mouse. Only it turned out that the mouse ate the cat."